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By Matt Howerton

EPA says it misjudged Animas spill, apologizes

Sediment from Colorado

UPDATED 10:15 PM MDT Aug 08,

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DENVER — A mine spill in Colorado that filled the Animas River with mustard-colored muck has reached Farmington and parts of the Navajo Nation.

Federal environmental officials said the muck that surged into the river from the mine contained heavy metals, including lead and arsenic, but they didn't immediately discuss amounts or health risks.

The Environmental Protection Agency said the spill also contained cadmium, aluminum, copper

and calcium.

EPA Regional Director Shaun McGrath did not mention whether the elements posed a health hazard, but he said local authorities were right to close the Animas River to human activities.

An EPA crew accidentally unleashed 1 million gallons of wastewater from the mine Wednesday that flowed into the river through a tributary.

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McGrath says the crew was trying to treat draining waste at the abandoned Gold King Mine in Southwestern Colorado when the workers inadvertently unplugged the waste.

Gov. Susana Martinez toured the contaminated river on Saturday and bashed EPA officials for not warning the state about the spill promptly.

Officials from New Mexico's Environmental Health Department say they didn't hear about the spill until Action 7 News started asking questions, and that an EPA official didn't call them at least 24 hours after the spill.

McGrath says the EPA is taking full responsibility for the blunder.

"We misjudged, and this is something that I'm owning up to," McGrath said. "The message was a day delayed and we do apologize for that."

Officials are still waiting on samples from the contaminated water to see what effects it could have on wildlife or people.

Right now, McGrath says the EPA doesn't even know what's exactly in the plume and are awaiting to see if toxic materials such as arsenic or lead are even in it.

If they are, McGrath says the EPA will have to monitor the river for the foreseeable future. The materials could possibly float to the bottom of the river and get flushed back up when it rains, according to McGrath.

McGrath has said no personnel have been disciplined as a result of the spill.

He says there were four crew members present at the time of the spill and that most of them were contracted employees while the EPA supervised and gave direction.

The Animas River is popular with boaters and anglers and runs into New Mexico.

Farmington officials warned residents who use wells in the floodplain of the Animas and San Juan rivers to avoid using their wells for drinking, cooking or bathing until tests have been completed.

Those who are unclear of the location of their wells or the floodplain can find maps at the San Juan County Emergency Operations website.

Free testing will be available at the San Juan County Fair on Monday.

Two potable water stations have been established in Farmington. They are located at these locations:



- Farmington Fire Station No. 6, 3101 W. Main St.
- Sycamore Park Community Center, 1051 Sycamore St.

The hours for the stations will be from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. beginning Sunday until further notice.

Residents should bring their own water containers to fill. Large tanks are not permitted.

City officials reminded residents that city water remains safe to drink.

Water troughs are also available at Berg/Animas Park to accommodate domestic animals and wildlife.

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JimB • 10/17/2015

Stand back folks, just another fine example of Obama's EPA at work here

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Fred Rose • 10/17/2015

Jim: The EPA is not new to Obama's Administration it has been around a long time. I even bet that the people in the field that screwed up where there before Obama came into office.

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Merrill McCollum • 10/17/2015

I get your point, Fred. However, it's hard to choke down how many Agency's that were already established before the President's tenure that have totally gone rogue, or completely incompetent. Established laws blatantly ignored from the top... IRS, VA, EPA, STATE, SECRET SERVICE... And so on and so on... Sorry, with so many Agency discrepancies and legal improprieties, it's clear to me, attention to detail or law has not been a cornerstone of this administration. Failures like these definitely are failures from the top.

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